



## Resonant Aliens

*Good and just societies require a narrative that helps them know the truth about existence and fight the constant temptation to self-deception.*

Stanley Hauerwas,  
“The Story-Formed Community:  
Reflections on *Watership Down*”

Earlier this year, I had the privilege of joining a contingent of evangelicals to visit Nogales, a town that straddles the US-Mexico border. There Cecilia shared her story, weary from a four-day trek across the Sonoran Desert, where she injured her feet and nearly drowned in a flash flood—only to be captured by the Department of Homeland Security and tossed back to her side of the fence. Some would consider Cecilia fortunate, particularly those who have lost daughters to corrupt “coyotes” who raped, robbed, or abandoned their charge.

If Cecilia had successfully evaded the border patrol, she may have made her way to Maricopa County, whose sheriff has received national attention for arresting over 32,000 illegal immigrants, putting many of them in tent cities, pink underwear, and chain gangs. This fate hangs over the head of millions daily, especially in Arizona, where public agencies are required to ID immigrants and hand over to federal authorities for deportation any who are found to be undocumented.

Rejection of the foreigner, of course, is as old as the Bible, exemplified by the experience of the Israelites in the land of Egypt. Abraham, the “wandering Aramean,” Moses, Ruth, and Joseph, to name a few, all left their homelands under duress and became resident aliens in a strange and inhospitable land. Hence, when God’s people at last settled in a bountiful land of promise, they needed

to constantly rehearse their story, one of alien-ness, delivered-ness, and ongoing identity as dependent and beloved people. For the Israelites, their true home was always to be Yahweh himself rather than the temporal sands beneath their feet.

As a fifth-generation, college-educated American citizen, my experience does not resonate much with that of weary wanderers like Cecilia. I did not have to leave loved ones, hire unscrupulous traffickers, incur debilitating debt, cross a blistering desert, or cry out to God in a desperate quest for work. I can shop, see a doctor, and go to church without fear. If I’m pulled over, I do not fear being cuffed, separated from my children, and whisked off to a detention facility without legal representation. I can go about my life, enjoying the benefits of a system that rewards me when I play by its rules. Mine is a narrative of privilege. But as a Christian, might I have another?

### What dark narrative forces millions of people to leave their families and risk death by dehydration or violence?

Theologian Stanley Hauerwas speaks of the church as a story-formed people, a community that is shaped by the event of the cross and thus lives by a different set of rules. Hauerwas asserts that “the church doesn’t have a social strategy, the church is a social strategy,” one that embodies for the world a society that, apart from God, cannot be pulled off. Faithful congregations live eschatologically, as visible signposts of God’s good future—when the whole of creation will live as one, free of barriers and abundantly fed. We enact God’s big story, in the messiness of the here and now.

Which brings me back to Cecilia. What dark narrative forces her and mil-

lions of others to leave their families and risk death by dehydration or violence? Hers is a flight from economic despair, a reality uncomfortably tied to America’s attachment to “free market” ideology, concretized with devastating effect in the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. NAFTA changed the game by allowing the dissolution of *ejidos* (farming collectives) into privately owned parcels. The resulting multitude of small, independent farmers, unable to compete with American and Canadian agribusinesses, were (and still are) forced to leave to provide for their families. In this picture, the privileged (we North Americans, that is) prosper at the expense of our neighbors to the south.

Their plight, shamefully underwritten by my own country’s specious trade policies, further fuels my longing for the church to be the church, living as a counter-narrative to the deceitful and inhumane scripts of a passing order. The migrant’s tale, like that of Cecilia, is an important gift, one that should strike a chord in us who, as God’s people, are called to live as sojourners in hostile territory. Her story should evoke, in our ecclesial conscience, the table at which needy sinners are graciously brought into communion with Christ and one another. We can join in solidarity with the strangers in our midst, together embracing a generous God who owns the cattle on a thousand hills, has enough for everyone, and does not need high-tech fences or barbed wire to establish his peace on earth. ■

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